

# Friday Writes: An Exercise in the Believing Game

Stephanie Paterson

*Think of how often in your pressured, overscheduled life you are cut off from your own imagination and can't even hear yourself think, let alone sense the significance of what you're thinking.*  
(Linda Trichter Metcalf and Tobin Simon xxii)

I

This past semester I tried something new in all of my undergraduate writing classes and called the practice “Friday Writes.”

Thomas Newkirk has described the time the Scots call the “gloaming” hour in his Introduction to *What To Expect When You're Expected To Teach*. There are dark days, days he comes into the classroom and feels “as if there is a great weight” he must move, and he is not always sure he can do it (3). For me this symbolic twilight, this heavy, slow, deadweight time occurs most prominently on Fridays—all day on Fridays. It's as if all the life energy has drained out of my students; I can see the writing on their slumped bodies and downcast heads. They are tired and they want out and they've only just arrived. Since historically this has almost always been the case, and since I was scheduled to teach three Monday, Wednesday, and Friday classes, I was looking for something new and exciting and, most important, something different from the status quo.

The idea for the classroom ritual of Friday Writes came from reading *Writing the Mind Alive: The Proprioceptive Method For Finding Your Authentic Voice* by Linda Trichter Metcalf and Tobin Simon. The book was given to me as a gift and had been sitting on my shelf for the past six years until this past July when the gift-giver gently reminded me that I might want to try this practice. I have re-read the book now several times with a highlighter in hand, so there are several streams of highlighter tracks in the book. The re-reading (as is so often the case) is so much richer that I have to hold back from marking the whole book.

I have been doing this writing practice in earnest now for the past eight months. The book begins with a foreword from Christiane Northrup, M.D., who writes, “The essence of health is trusting yourself, your thoughts, and your feelings. Self-trust is the ability to know the truth about what you think and feel in your very bones—and then to use this information to guide your life” (xv). I have been too adept at playing what Peter Elbow calls “the doubting game” for much of my life. I tend to doubt everything first. I doubt I have anything worthwhile to

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say, I doubt my preparation, I doubt my ability, I doubt gut instincts, I doubt what I think and feel. I have found that the doubting game, played well, can be annihilating. Peggy McIntosh maps this emotion in a wider cultural frame in a series of Stone Center (Wellesley) talks entitled, "Feeling Like a Fraud," Parts I, II, and III. McIntosh argues that, in some cases, a woman's sense of being a fraud may be an indication of her rejection of the traditional competitive and hierarchical power structure. In the first paper she writes, "The more hierarchical the activity or institution, and the higher up we go in it, the greater our feelings of fraudulence are likely to be" (4).

As if it wasn't enough to skewer myself with the stick of self-doubt, I've even been in trouble with the believing game, as Irene Papoulis describes (see this issue), being too quick to believe others as a way of connecting so that I can run into the equal danger of losing myself in this way, too. I do agree with Peter Elbow that "we need to build a richer culture of rationality—richer than mere doubting or critical thinking . . . so that people will feel that they are not thinking carefully unless they try to believe ideas they don't want to believe" ("The Believing Game" 5). In this way I approached the Friday Writes as a series of trial-and-error experiments (Moffett).

Pain has been a great motivator in my life, so it is not surprising, in retrospect, that before I began this daily writing I was plagued with stress and work-related health issues. Pain, coupled with the hunger for a kind of interior freedom, made the promise of "writing the mind alive" attractive and led me to make a date with myself to write for twenty-five minutes at a time, a day at a time. The goal was not to think too far ahead and to simply commit to doing one Proprioceptive Write each day. While I have a terrible time following rules, miraculously, by playing the believing game I was able to follow the directions for writing proprioceptively.

Grasping the meaning of the key term "proprioceptive" was the first high hurdle. Metcalf and Simon anticipate resistance and sub-title the section in the book in which they explain the concept of proprioception "Why Such a Funny Name?". In a sense proprioception is embodied knowing. They trace the term back to Nobel Laureate and pioneering neurophysicist Sir Charles Scott Sherrington who identified the system over a hundred years ago. They explain that biologically we have "actual nerves, called proprioceptors, located in the muscles, joints, and tendons [that] communicate back and forth with the brain, orienting the body to its own movement, position, and tone" (10). It is proprioceptive sense that enables us to "grasp a flower or a glass of water without crushing it or dropping it" (10). "Through proprioception we are able to synthesize emotion and imagination" and for this reason "the proprioceptive system may be viewed as the interface of body and mind, as well as the source of emotional expression," so that when we write in this way we respond bodily and mentally. Metcalf and Simon use the term metaphorically to describe a kind of writing that unifies the mind/body split (12).

They also acknowledge David Bohm's theory of proprioception of thought in his book, *On Dialogue*. Bohm was "a protégé of Einstein and an important twentieth-century physicist, [and he] was concerned with how thought, feeling, and memory—in other words, consciousness—shape our reality. He believed that 'the proprioception of thought,' could change consciousness if we listen to ourselves and others openly" (Metcalf and Simon 12).

In the actual Proprioceptive Method there are three simple rules:

1. Write What You Hear
2. Listen to What You Write
3. Be Ready To Ask The Proprioceptive Question: “What do I mean by\_\_\_\_\_?”.

I clear a space on a large wooden table in my office. I purchase some white tapered candles and play a Bach disc. This music is suggested because it “roughly reflects the steady rhythm of the human pulse” (xxi). I get in the habit of dating each Proprioceptive Write (PW). I write on blank sheets of 8½ x 11-sized paper, as recommended. Unlined paper is symbolic. Metcalf and Simon explain:

using plain, unlined paper for your Write is a gesture of freedom. With it you are departing from the schoolroom that straight lines suggest and becoming *the author of a more complex, perhaps messier, but inherently richer script whose movement and direction is entirely your own.* (31, emphasis added)

I let my words spill on to additional white pages; after dating them, I include page numbers and add them to a binder. The practice which includes lighting a candle, listening to my self, listening to Bach, and circling back to ask the important proprioceptive question has grounded me. I start to notice more of a balance between the believing and doubting games. I learn to listen as I write. I start to feel like a Writer who is writing. I start to breathe differently. I start to trust myself more. As the summer unfolds, I start dreaming and imagining what it might look like to bring this practice into the classroom in a university setting, and I am stopped dead in my tracks.

The first concern is that students will feel uncomfortable. “You can’t do this in the college classroom,” I hear. Then I hear the internalized voice of self-defense and self-preservation, the proprietary, “keeping up appearances” voice, worried about what colleagues, administrators, and parents will say. This voice is capable of endless berating, experienced as self-battery: “but this isn’t academic writing . . . our job is to prepare students to write academically.” Doubt. Doubt. Doubt.

I continue to write. The writing strengthens me. At the end of each PW, to bring the writing ritual to a formal close, I blow out the candle, turn off the music, and write in response to what Metcalf and Simon refer to as the “Four Concluding Questions.” They are as follows:

- 1) What thoughts were heard but not written yet?
- 2) How or what do I feel now?
- 3) What larger story is this Write part of?
- 4) What ideas came up for future Writes?

I take time in the silence to respond fully to these important concluding questions. “The shape of the believing game is waiting, patience, not being in a hurry,” as Elbow says (*Writing Without Teachers* 177). In answering the four concluding questions, Metcalf and Simon say, “this is often where revelations occur in the

session" (39). Consequently, they explain, "don't hurry through them or cut short your answers. Remember the joke about the airplane pilot who contacted the control tower. 'I'm lost,' he reported, 'but I'm making good time'" (39). In this context, following the rules pays off. In the patient waiting and listening all sorts of intricate connections slowly start to reveal themselves. I expose assumptions and expectations. I start to see small, isolated events in my life against a backdrop of cultural stories I've inherited, some shaping me in ways I don't care to be shaped. I start to give myself assignments: "look into this," or "read that," or "write more about \_\_\_\_\_." These self-assignments are part of a much larger curriculum I can't see or conceptualize, only intuit. I start to trust inklings and to follow leads as they emerge in the writing. I have months and months of "larger stories" to return to, and months and months of rooting myself in my emotional responses, and rich plans for future PWs.

All through the summer days, I continue to light the candle. I hit "play" on the CD player, and I am swept along by the tempo of the Baroque music. I write with a listening ear and day-by-day I gather pages until the fall term begins, and I have a small binder full of writing to show my students.

## II

*The goal of any curriculum is to focus attention and effort on what is essential; it is to honor the principle of economy, to resist the attractions of comprehensiveness.*

(Newkirk, Holding On 132)

In the elaborate process of curriculum planning and of dreaming up the new semester, I realize I want my students to experience some of the joy and surprise and rewards of this writing. I make the decision to include this approach to writing alongside genre-based approaches to writing. I feel like I'm smuggling in something subversive. The truth is, I am. I have to play the believing game to make these Friday Writes work, and I do.

On the first day of introducing Friday Writes, I come with a ream of white paper, the Baroque music, and a candle. I explain a little of the theory behind the practice which I culled from *Writing the Mind Alive*. Then I project the three rules on an overhead using a transparency. Pressing this ancient artifact into service is intentional; I am playing school. I imagine the familiar beam of the overhead as somehow comforting to my students in its familiarity. I tell my students quite simply, "this is going to feel weird." I look up and see some smiles and smirks. There is an air of suspense. There is also nervous electricity in the air because this is something unexpected. There is no script for what we are about to do together. "Since you probably haven't done writing like this before, it will help to be patient. Give this some time. Most likely it will feel strange the first few times, but then I think you will find some comfort and some surprising rewards in this writing." For the rationale for this weekly writing ritual, I quote my good friend, who says, "if you value something, you give it time." "I have carved out time in our curriculum for Friday Writes every Friday of the term. So let's begin."

In one class we are able to form a large circle, and in two other classes we write in rows. I cut out a quadrant of florescent lights, so we're not all under the

probing spotlight. For twenty-five minutes, all we hear is the music, we sense the glow of the candle, and we experience a silence that I have very rarely heard in school. It all feels taboo, and there is pleasure in this edgy feeling. We all write. The only way that I overtly and consciously deviate from the practice is that I explain that I will never ask to read their writes, nor will I ask them to read aloud. I say “this writing will be private to you, and at the end of the term you will do a guided Friday Write. This will require going back through and re-reading what you have written, observing and taking some notes.”

### III

*You can't learn anything new if you're tied up in knots about how you're performing.*  
(Metcalf and Simon 44)

My self-study of the process brings me to this story. In a section entitled, “Perfection” in *Art & Fear: Observations On the Perils (and Rewards) of Artmaking*, David Bayles and Ted Orland write:

The ceramics teacher announced on opening day that he was dividing the class into two groups. All those on the left side of the studio, he said, would be graded solely on the *quantity* of work they produced, all those on the right solely on its *quality*. His procedure was simple: on the final day of class he would bring in his bathroom scales and weigh the works of the “quantity” group: fifty pounds of pots rated an “A,” forty pounds a “B,” and so on. Those being graded on “quality,” however, need to produce only one pot—albeit a perfect one—to get an “A.” Well, came grading time and a curious fact emerged: the works of highest quality were all produced by the group being graded for quantity. It seems that while the “quantity” group was busily churning out piles of work—and learning from their mistakes—the “quality” group had sat theorizing about perfection, and in the end had little more to show for their efforts than grandiose theories and a pile of dead clay.  
(29, original emphasis)

The moral of the story: “If you think good work is somehow synonymous with perfect work, you are headed for big trouble” (29). Frankly, I have been personally and professionally headed for big trouble for a long time now, spending too much time theorizing, tied up in knots. This pleasurable writing ritual has renewed a sense of hope and excitement in the practice of writing to learn, to discover, to remember, to befriend process, and to re-learn what I have forgotten from neglect.

### IV

*What you want to discover in Proprioceptive Writing is how you experience your life. . . . You want to stop reacting and start reflecting. . . . You want to use your own thought-flow and the feelings it carries in its stream to gain self-knowledge.*  
(Metcalf and Simon 44)

In order to make the Friday Writes work, I explicitly introduce students to both Elbow's concept of the believing and doubting games and Blau's seven traits of performative literacy. For me, Sheridan Blau's traits of performative literacy serve as part of the methodology required for playing the believing game. In other words, I have found that to "play" the believing game better, we all need to practice:

- \* a capacity for sustained, focused attention
- \* a willingness to suspend closure
- \* a willingness to take risks
- \* a tolerance for failure
- \* a tolerance for ambiguity, paradox, and uncertainty
- \* intellectual generosity
- \* metacognitive awareness. (211)

When the instinct is to clench or resist or quit, we can use the traits to become inquisitive and open, asking questions (tolerance for ambiguity, paradox, uncertainty), observing (suspending closure), and showing some compassion for ourselves in the throes of trying something new (intellectual generosity), etc.

I agree with Elbow that "the believing game is alive in our midst—but not well" ("The Believing Game" 10). We tend to privilege the doubting game in the academy and give short shrift to the believing game. We also tend to privilege textual and intertextual literacy and don't always foreground the traits of performative literacy which constitute the groundwork for most real learning to occur.

It occurs to me now that our Friday Writes may more closely resemble what Donna Strickland calls "the trying game" (see this issue). She explains, "the trying game asks readers and writers to suspend the stance taking long enough to notice the flux, the moment-to-moment changes as the body reacts." To tolerate "flux," we returned to the traits of performative literacy—the "willingness to suspend closure," and so forth. I think with the risky experiment of Friday Writes, without these habits of mind, we'd all be dead in the water.

## V

*When our teaching is determined by an unthinking subscription to professional norms, or an uncritical mimicking of the behaviors of teachers we encountered in our own lives, our chances of helping our students learn are severely reduced."*  
(Brookfield 25)

At the end the semester, I asked for anonymous feedback to learn how the activity was perceived and received. Students told me what they liked and identified a few things they learned from the weekly writing ritual. Fifty individuals responded to these prompts, and the feedback was surprisingly positive. I'll quote just a few of my undergraduate students in their own words:

- \* The first thing I learned was that all of my thoughts are connected (well I re-learned this) and by writing about them I could make the connections and even deal with some problems I had been struggling with. The second thing Friday Writes gave to me was to remind me that I can express my

thoughts clearly and that helped me [to talk] with others and third, I remembered why I loved to write.

- \* Yes, in a way [Friday Writes] made me a lot more aware [of] my thinking habits and how much I stress [about] things.
- \* I learned how to stop and take a look at what I've written and ask myself the proprioceptive question.

They describe increased fluency, which they referred to as “flow,” increased self-trust, and increased interest in the practice and process of writing. Many noticed that “there is a larger story that builds up in the writing” after weeks and weeks of doing this practice. They noticed thematic patterns in the writing. They said that our Friday Writes helped them to be more open with their own ideas and emotions. In essence, they grew in self-trust. In addition, I have found, as Jacob Needleman eloquently articulates,

words, properly received; ideas, thoughtfully pondered; stories and images heard and attended to with an open heart, can help us feel the relationship between the question of our being and the problem of our life in time, after which ideas can find their proper place in our minds. (20)

Finally, the Friday Writes gave us respite from *chronos* time (the linear school clock) and allowed us to enter into *kairos* or sacred time. For twenty-five minutes each Friday, I protected this time and space for Friday Writes to happen and for me personally, there was a timeless quality to these Writes.

## VI

*This trait of insatiable curiosity is one I've encountered in talented people in every field of creativity. . . . The willingness to learn, to be curious, and always to be humble enough to seek out teachers is apparent in everyone who grows in their work.*  
(Cousineau 84)

I am reminded, as Elbow says, “that there will be perhaps more skeptical readers than usual whose teeth are set on edge by my mere mention of candles in the classroom.” Sometimes I am that reader. Just recently I attended a Writing Center Conference with a focus on incorporating play and embodiment in Writing Center work. The keynote speakers asked us all to shed our shoes before entering the gymnasium. “You want me to what?” I thought, sliding off my shoes with reservations. As we all entered the gym, I thought the discomfort in the room was palpable. Some in skirts and suits sat in folded metal chairs placed around the perimeter and looked down at those of us on the floor. Reflecting upon this, I am struck with how sometimes simple, ordinary, even mundane acts brought into new contexts can be counter-cultural. Ruth Danon, the keynote speaker, explained that she wanted to break the frame of the classroom as a way of returning to a childhood frame. She wanted us to consider how we might find a sense of play in writing. She noted that feeling uncomfortable was not necessarily a bad thing. I would add (having been reading Pema Chodron) that when we are uncomfortable we tend to start paying a different, more alert kind of attention.

## VII

According to Peggy Noonan, Joseph Langford in *Mother Teresa's Secret Fire* described Mother Teresa as "a mystic with sleeves rolled up" (qtd. in Noonan), not, in Noonan's words, "as a female Albert Schweitzer." Noonan recounts Langford's story of the things heard and learned from Mother Teresa, especially the truth that "You must find your own Calcutta. You don't have to go to India. Calcutta is all around you" (qtd. in Noonan).

I teach at a California State University in the Central Valley of California, and I have the privilege of working with an incredibly diverse student body. It occurs to me every term that my students' particular experiences are historically underrepresented. They are the children of migrant farm workers, they are Hmong and Middle-Eastern refugees, they are predominantly second-language speakers, or Generation 1.5, who speak a primary language in home and English in the schools. They are often the first in their families to attend college. My students come from around the world—from India, Iran, Iraq, Thailand, Vietnam, Mexico, and South America to list only a few of the places. CSU Stanislaus is an Hispanic-serving institution. I offer this demographic snapshot not to compare myself to Mother Teresa but to argue that the university is my Calcutta.

The experience of being the first in a family to attend college can be more than scary; it can be downright alienating, as I have described in earlier writing (Paterson). Every semester I expect a certain amount of crisis and chaos because my students bring complex lives to the classroom; they balance work and school, and some are the primary caretakers of siblings. This past semester one student's brother was killed in a gang-related shooting. One student confessed that she couldn't come to class because of PTSD-related symptoms, suffered from an unreported rape that occurred at 2 a.m. on our campus. One student has returned to school after a long illness with a debilitating autoimmune disease. One Friday I come into class, and Harry, from the Bay area, asks, "Are we gonna do a Friday Write?" He says they set his mind at ease.

I'm sure those who crafted our University's Mission Statement didn't have "Friday Writes" in mind as an example of a strategy "that attract[s] and hold[s] student attention," but I can say that for almost every Friday of the term, for three different classes spread across the day for twenty-five minutes (with the exception of the Baroque music), you could almost hear a pin drop. There was a different sort of energy, an intellectual and emotional fuel fired by a writing in school unlike any other kind of writing in school. It was writing in school, but not of school, somehow.

I was pleased with my frightening experiment. Inspired by Georgia Heard, I ask my students to write down two things they will take with them from the semester and one thing they hope to leave behind. Perhaps the most rewarding piece of feedback I received came on the last day of the semester, when a student told me that my Friday Writes portion of the curriculum had become her extracurriculum (Gere). She said that she tried a Friday Write with her parents who were curious about this weekly writing ritual taking place in my class. They each took turns reading their Writes to each other and listening. My student explained that the one thing she will take with her is the goal to do Friday Writes once a month with her parents as a way of checking in with each other and connecting as a family.



For me personally, I have gone out on a limb to experiment with Proprioceptive Writing in the college classroom. And then further out on a limb to write this essay. In my home I have a lot of bookshelves, and every so often I have a title that I'm not sure I want to share with guests, so I flip the book on the shelf so the spine faces inward and the title remains private. These backward books blend right in. At first, I thought I might house this essay similarly. However, one of my favorite lines in *Writing Without Teachers* occurs in the Appendix, when Elbow explains that we play the believing game to get to better truths. I suspect this is true in my students' Friday Writes. Gratefully, it's true for me in my professional teaching life. Why would I want to hide this?<sup>1</sup> ☐

<sup>1</sup>I would like to thank Dr. Linda Metcalf for taking the time to read a draft of this essay.

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